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Investigating The Iranian EFL Teachers' Pronunciation Of Neutral And Non-Neutral Affixes in Derivative Words Based On Their Gender And Teaching Experience

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Abstract

Mastering pronunciation in EFL context, where direct access to native speaker is scarce, is a highly challenging objective for many language students in Iran. Derivative words more specifically, pose their own problems. There are different types of suffixes, two of which are neutral and non-neutral. This survey study examines teachers' pronunciation of the neutral and non-neutral suffixes based on their gender and teaching experience. The sample included 40 Ilamian EFL teachers teaching English at different high schools and institutes. None of teachers studied in English speaking countries. To analyze data, two kinds of test were employed: the Man-Whitney U Test for gender and the Kruskal–Wallis for teaching experience. There is no treatment in this study. Findings revealed that there is no meaningful difference between female and male answers in the pronunciation of neutral and non-neutral suffixes. As for teaching experience, the results showed that there is no meaningful difference between three existed ranges of experience with the pronunciation of neutral and non-neutral suffixes.

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1. Introduction

One of the most difficult troubles facing non-native speakers of English is pronunciation. It is usually the largest obstacle to overcome when trying to achieve fluency. Pronunciation is an integral part of second or foreign language learning since it directly affects learners' communicative competence as well as performance on the career. It is the primary medium for communication in which people share ideas and understandings with each other (Jenkins, 2000). Correct pronunciation is an important factor determining the meaningfulness and success of communication.

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Pronunciation involves far more than individual sounds. As defined by (Roach, 2004), pronunciation has been viewed as the sum of three components. The components are sounds, stress and intonation. Word stress, sentence stress, intonation, and word linking all influence the sound of spoken English, not to mention the way we often slur words and phrases together in casual speech (Roach, 2004). 'What are you going to do?' becomes 'Whaddaya gonna do?' English pronunciation involves too many complexities for learners to strive for a complete elimination of accent, but improving pronunciation will boost self esteem, facilitate communication, and possibly lead to a better job or at least more respect in the workplace. Effective communication is of greatest importance, so choose first to work on problems that significantly hinder communication and let the rest go (Jenkins, 2000). Remember that your students also need to learn strategies for dealing with misunderstandings, since native pronunciation is for most an unrealistic goal. A student's first language often interferes with English pronunciation. For example, /p/ is aspirated in English but not in Spanish, so when a Spanish speaker pronounces 'pig' without a puff of air on the /p/, an American may hear 'big' instead (Freyd, & Baron, 1982). Sometimes the students will be able to identify specific problem sounds and sometimes they won't. You can ask them for suggestions, but you will also need to observe them over time and make note of problem sounds. Another challenge resulting from differences in the first language is the inability to hear certain English sounds that the native language does not contain. Often these are vowels, as in 'ship' and 'sheep,' which many learners cannot distinguish. The Japanese are known for confusing /r/ and /l/, as their language contains neither of these but instead has one sound somewhere between the two. For problems such as these, listening is crucial because students can't produce a sound they can't hear (Dalton, D. 2002). Descriptions of the sound and mouth position can help students increase their awareness of subtle sound differences (Morley, J. 1991). Central to lexical morphology is the principle that the morphological component of a grammar is organized in a series of hierarchical strata (cf. Allen, 1978; Siegel, 1974; Pesetsky, 1979; Kiparsky, 1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1985; Mohanan, 1982, 1986; Mohanan and Mohanan, 1984; Halle and Mohanan, 1985; Strauss, 1982a; and Pulleyblank, 1986).

Katamba (1997) states that English affixes (both prefixes and suffixes) can be grouped in two classes on the basis of their phonological behavior. One type is neutral and the other type is non-neutral. Neutral affixes have no phonological effect on the base to which they have attached, but non-neutral ones affect in some way the consonant or vowel segments, or the location of the stress in the base to which they are attached, they also tend to trigger changes in the shape of vowels or consonants of the base to which they are added. In SPE (this is the standard way of referring to Chomsky and Halle's 1968 book, *The Sound Pattern of English*) the difference between the behavior of neutral and non-neutral affixes was dealt with in terms of the strength of boundaries. Between the base and a neutral suffix like -ness or -ly, there was said to intervene a strong boundary (symbolized by '#'). In contrast, a weak boundary (symbolized by '+') was assumed to separate the base from a non-neutral suffix like -ic, -ee, or -th. The distinction between non-neutral affixes (associated with '+boundary' in SPE) and neutral affixes (associated with '#boundary') corresponds roughly to the more traditional distinction between primary and secondary affixes (Whitney, 1889; Bloomfield, 1933). The neutral/non-neutral distinction corresponds to the more traditional distinction between primary (= non-neutral) and secondary (= neutral) affixes and the classic distinction of weak boundary ('+') between neutral suffix and base vs. strong boundary ('#') between non-neutral suffix and base in SPE.

2 Statement of the Problem

A large part of learning English is about the learning of the pronouncing derivative words. They also called derived form in grammar, form that has undergone derivation from another, as atomic from atom. According to Freyd, & Baron, (1982) derivative words are problematic especially in pronunciation for EFL teachers and students. The usefulness of teaching pronunciation is a widely debated subject in the language teaching world. Some of the current research would suggest that teachers can make little or no difference in improving their students' pronunciation. In contrast, there is research that indicates that the teacher can make a noticeable difference if certain criteria, such as the teaching of suprasegmentals are fulfilled. Many studies have been trying to capture the influence of formal training of pronunciation on the performance of the language learners. A gender-based approach to pronunciation accuracy of advanced EFL learners was conducted by Shahrokh Jahandar, Morteza Khodabandehlou, Gohar Seyedi, Reza Mousavi Dolat Abadi (2012). This study aimed at investigating the impact of gender on

pronunciation accuracy of advanced Iranian EFL learners and whether male or female learners will outperform in their performance of the pronunciation accuracy of phonological characteristics in their speech production. The results revealed that female outperform male subjects in producing accurate consonants, but not vowels, that it is not significantly noticeable to result in complete superiority of female over male subjects.

In another study the relationship between both extraversion/introversion and gender to the pronunciation accuracy of English as a foreign language is examined by Badran (2001) through a test. It was found that: (1) extroversion/introversion positively correlated with English pronunciation accuracy among Arabic speaking Egyptian college students; (2) male students outperformed female students in their performance of the pronunciation accuracy test; (3) extroverted students were more accurate in their English language pronunciation than introverted ones. One of the most difficult troubles facing non-native speakers of English is pronunciation of derivative words which is missing in the literature. It is usually the largest obstacle to overcome when trying to achieve fluency. That is why; the issue of pronunciation has been dealt with in this M.A thesis. Consequently, attempt is made to deal with the pronunciation of neutral and non-neutral.

3 Research Questions and Hypotheses

1. Is there any relationship between teachers' gender and their pronunciation of the neutral and non-neutral suffixes?

2. Is there any relationship between teachers' experience and their pronunciation of the neutral and non-neutral suffixes?

According to the above questions, the following hypotheses are formulated.

H0₁. There is no relationship between teachers' gender and their pronunciation of the neutral and non-neutral suffixes.

H0₂. There is no relationship between teachers' experience and their pronunciation of the neutral and non-neutral suffixes.

4 Methodology

4.1 Participants

40 Iranian EFL teachers teaching English at different high schools and institutes in Ilam were asked to participate in this study (20 females and 20 males). None of teachers studied in English speaking countries. They had at least one year of foreign language teaching experience.

4.2 Instrument and Procedures

The questionnaire included 30 items, each with two sentences, the first sentence with the root and the second sentence with the derivative word of that root. We used neutral and non neutral suffixes randomly with 10 neutral and 20 non neutral suffixes. Afterward, the subjects were asked to read sentences while their voices are recorded. This was the procedure for the rest of the sentences in the lists. Each part had 2 answers, correct and incorrect, that were scored according to the changes due to the presence of non neutral suffixes. These changes were of three types: the stress placement, vowel changes and changes of roots.

The reliability of the questionnaire utilized in this study was calculated via Cronbach Alfa using sample of 40 teachers. It comes out to be .85% which is within the acceptable range of reliability. The validity of the questionnaire was proved by referring to three experts in the field.

First of all, by using "Word of Words" by (Richek, 1993), a questionnaire was designed. It included 30 items, each with two sentences, root and derivative words which included neutral and non neutral suffixes randomly. During April, May, and June 2014, researcher went to the different schools and institutes in Ilam and requested teachers to participate in this survey and asked them to read the included sentences. To collect as much clear data as possible, we go to another class with very low noises. With scores that they received for each part, the frequencies

and mean scores were calculated for each teacher.

5 Results

To analyze the data, a set of statistical procedures such as descriptive and inferential statistics are used. The Man-whitney U Test was used to describe and analyze data based on gender. As there is three ranges for years of experience teaching English, Kruskal–Wallis Test was used to describe and analyze data.

5-1 Descriptive Statistics

One of the factors that is measured in this study is to find out if there is any difference based on gender, in the pronunciation of different suffixes among teachers. The performance of the male and female participants to answer the 30 questions is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The frequency of the answers to the pronunciation questions based on gender					
Females' answers			Males' answers		
Question	Correct	In Correct	Question	Correct	In Correct
1	18	2	1	20	0
2	12	8	2	11	9
3	9	11	3	11	9
4	11	9	4	9	11
5	12	8	5	6	14
6	7	13	6	12	8
7	14	6	7	11	9
8	18	2	8	19	1
9	10	10	9	7	13
10	15	5	10	13	7
11	8	12	11	13	7
12	9	11	12	6	14
13	18	2	13	19	1
14	11	9	14	8	12
15	18	2	15	19	1
16	20	0	16	19	1
17	7	13	17	6	14
18	17	3	18	19	1
19	11	9	19	12	8
20	8	12	20	11	9
21	16	4	21	15	5
22	10	10	22	10	10
23	12	8	23	15	5
24	9	11	24	5	15
25	16	4	25	19	1
26	20	0	26	19	1

27	11	9	27	6	14
28	16	4	28	13	7
29	10	10	29	9	11
30	10	10	30	11	9

Based on the above table, it is possible to calculate the mean of the male and female subjects which is presented in the following figure.

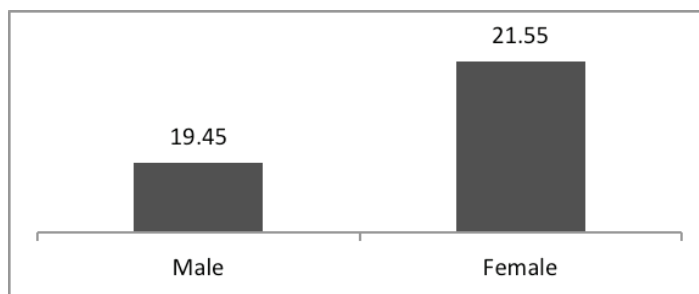


Figure2: The mean of the answers to the pronunciation questions based on gender

In the above figure, the mean score of male and female participants is represented. As it is revealed, the two groups have had almost the same performance, although females are a little better.

As stated earlier, teaching experience was another investigated factor which aims at findings the effect of experience on the pronunciation of derivative words. Here the performance of teachers with three different ranges of teaching experience to answer the 30 questions is presented.

Figure 3: The frequency of the answers to the pronunciation questions based on teaching experience								
1-7 years teaching experience			8-14 years teaching experience			15-21 years teaching experience		
Question	Correct	In Correct	Question	Correct	In Correct	Question	Correct	In Correct
1	19	2	1	11	0	1	8	0
2	14	7	2	4	7	2	5	3
3	10	11	3	4	7	3	6	2
4	11	10	4	4	7	4	5	3
5	11	10	5	4	7	5	3	5
6	6	15	6	7	4	6	6	2
7	12	9	7	9	2	7	4	4
8	19	2	8	11	0	8	7	1
9	13	8	9	3	8	9	1	7
10	16	5	10	7	4	10	5	3
11	12	9	11	4	7	11	5	3
12	8	13	12	4	7	12	5	3
13	19	2	13	11	0	13	7	1
14	12	9	14	2	9	14	5	3
15	19	2	15	11	0	15	7	1
16	20	1	16	11	0	16	8	0
17	5	16	17	4	7	17	4	4
18	18	3	18	10	1	18	8	0
19	14	7	19	6	5	19	3	5
20	10	11	20	7	4	20	2	6
21	18	3	21	7	4	21	6	2
22	11	10	22	5	6	22	4	4
23	12	9	23	8	3	23	7	1
24	9	12	24	3	8	24	2	6
25	16	5	25	11	0	25	8	0

26	20	1	26	11	0	26	8	0
27	10	11	27	3	8	27	4	4
28	15	6	28	8	3	28	6	2
29	10	11	29	5	6	29	4	4
30	12	9	30	5	6	30	4	4

The mean of the different ranges of teaching experience is presented in the following figure.

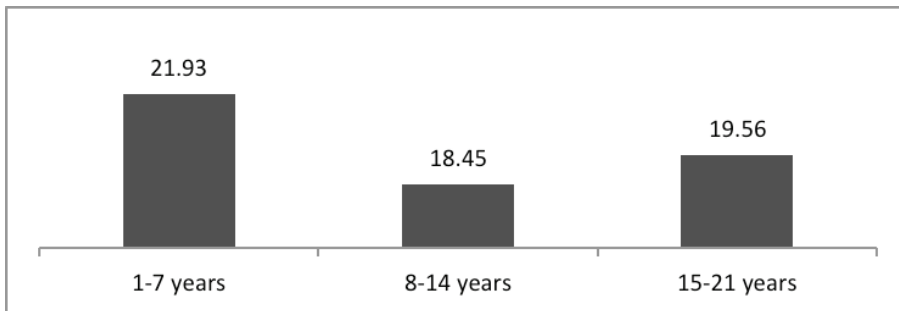


Figure4: The frequency of the answers to the pronunciation questions based on teaching experience

As figure2 shows, teachers are divided into three groups based on their experience. The years of experience are ranged from 1 to 7 years with 21 teachers, 8 to 14 years with 11 teachers, and 15 to 21 years with 8 teachers. In the above figure, the mean score of teachers with three different ranges of teaching experience is represented. As it is revealed, the three groups have had almost the different performance, teachers with 1-7 years of teaching are the best group and those with 15-21 years of teaching experience are a little better than teachers with 8-14 years of teaching experience.

5-2 Inferential Statistics

After presenting the descriptive statistics, now we are going to realize the effect of teachers' gender as an independent variable on their pronunciation of neutral and non-neutral suffixes as a dependent variable which is formalized in the following hypothesis.

There is no meaningful relationship between teachers' gender and their pronunciation of the neutral and non-neutral suffixes.

To test the effect of teachers' gender on their pronunciation of neutral and non-neutral suffixes, Man-whitney U Test was employed. The obtained results are presented in table 3.

Figure 5: The results obtained by applying Man-whitney U Test

Gender	N	Mean	Man-whitney U	Z	Sig
Female	20	21.55	179.000	.570	.583
Male	20	19.45			
Total	40	-			

As stated earlier, the mean score of female participants is 21.55 and for male participants is 19.45. As table 3

shows, this difference is not meaningful, because the Z value equal .570 and Sig= .583. Accordingly this hypothesis is proved. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no meaningful difference between male and female participants as far as the pronunciation of the neutral and non neutral suffixes is concerned.

As for the second independent variable, we are going to realize the effect of teaching experience as an independent variable on their pronunciation of neutral and non-neutral suffixes as a dependent variable which is formalized in the following hypothesis.

There is no meaningful relationship between teachers' experience and their pronunciation of the neutral and non-neutral suffixes.

To test the effect of teaching experience on their pronunciation of neutral and non-neutral suffixes, Kruskal–Wallis Test was employed. The obtained results are presented in Figure 6.

Figure 6: The results obtained by applying Kruskal–Wallis Test

Experience	N	Mean	χ^2	Df	Sig
1-7 years	21	21.93	.707	2	.702
8-14 years	11	18.45			
15-21 years	8	19.56			

Based on the above table, the mean of teachers with 1 to 7 years experience is 21.93, for teachers with 8 to 14 experience equals 18.45, and for teachers with 15 to 21 years experience, it equals 19.56. As table 4-10 shows, this difference is not meaningful, because the $\chi^2 = .707$ and Sig = .702. Accordingly this hypothesis is accepted. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no meaningful difference among these three groups of teachers with three different ranges of experience of teaching English in the pronunciation of the neutral and non- neutral affixes.

6. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher's pronouncing of the neutral and non-neutral suffixes based on their gender and teaching experience. Based on these two factors, there are two research questions and accordingly there are two hypotheses. In the first hypothesis, we are going to realize the effect of teachers' gender on their pronunciation of neutral and non-neutral affixes. The result of the Man-whitney Test revealed that there is no meaningful difference between male and female participants in pronouncing the derivative words, and both groups have had no meaningful different in their performance, although female were a little better. This piece of finding is opposed to Badran (2001)' results in which, he concluded that there is no difference between male and female language learners. However, Jahandar's study supports the findings of present study.

For teaching experience, we are trying to realize the effect of teaching experience on their pronunciation of neutral and non-neutral. Since there are three different ranges of teaching experience, the Kruskal-Wallis Test was employed to analyze the data. The results obtained from the Kruskal-Wallis Test revealed that the difference was not meaningful. It was predictable that those teachers who just had finished their education and began to teach have more motivation to be of better language proficiency. Almost all teachers with 1-7 years of teaching experience are young, and they have access to different kinds of new technology such as learning programs, the Internet, tapes, CDs, etc. They may have attended conversation classes in English language institutes during their learning period and in today's world it is so easy to travel to other countries and have interaction with native people. That is why that different teachers with different teaching experience have had no meaningful difference in their pronunciation; each group has its own advantages and disadvantages which can be used to justify their almost the same pronunciation. The less experienced teachers have had the benefit of being more modern and equipped with communicative tools which may improve their pronunciation. Accordingly, their almost equal performance can be

justified.

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